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INTERVIEWEE: Detective Florencio Soto
INTERVIEWER: Emily Roman

Tape 1: Side A

Roman: The following is an interview with Detective Florencio Soto, conducted by Emily Roman.

So, Mr. Soto, what is your age?

Soto: Forty-six.

Roman: When did you decide to come to New Jersey?

Soto: I decided to come to NJ in 1959.

Roman: What was your reason for coming?

Soto: I wanted to get a better education, and then after that get a job and help my family.

Roman: How old were you when you came?

Soto: I was 18 years old.

Roman: So, you had already finished high school?

Soto: I never finished high school.

Roman: Till what grade did you complete?

Soto: I quit school when I was in 8th grade. It was in 1959 when I quit school. I was in 8th grade.

Roman: How was your life in Puerto Rico?

Soto: It was good. It was very poor.

Roman: How did you live? What was your daily routine?

Soto: Daily routine was working on the farm, helping my father and going to school. Sometimes I had to miss school to work.

Roman: What were your parents' names?

Soto: Marcelino Soto and Manuela Hernandez.

Roman: When you came to New Jersey, did you come by yourself?

Soto: I came by myself, yes. A friend of mine sent me the airline ticket.

Roman: So you came by plane. How did your family react when they knew you were coming to NJ?

Soto: Like any other family would act. They were sad. They didn't want me to come to NJ. At first I was coming to a strange city, a strange state where I didn't know anybody at the time. They were afraid that something would happen to me.

Roman: How did you feel?

Soto: I felt the same way, too. I had to start living a new way of life. So I took a chance and I came.

Roman: Did you have somebody here waiting for you?

Soto: Like I said, a friend of mine sent me the ticket so I came to live with him.

Roman: And this was...?

Soto: May 10, 1959.

Roman: And you came to Newark?

Soto: I came to Newark. Directly to Newark.

Roman: When you came, did you get a job fast?

Soto: To took me about two weeks before I could get a job. Since I didn't know too much english it was hard for me to get a job. So I tried different places.

Roman: How did the other racial groups treat you?

Soto: They treated me alright. They didn't bother me.

Roman: You didn't face any prejudice?

Soto: No, I didn't face any prejudice. In the beginning I didn't even know what it meant, prejudice, at the time, so I didn't pay any attention to anybody. I just had to get a job and help my family back in Puerto Rico. It was after that, after a couple of years I was here, that's when the prejudice starts (ed).

Roman: So originally from what town are you?

Soto: San Sebastian.

Roman: And you still have family down there?

Soto: I still have two brothers and a sister.

Roman: What are their names?

Soto: Their names are, Carmen, my older brother is Demetrio, and my younger brother is Jose Ramon.

Roman: Do they ever plan on coming here?

Soto: They've been here before and they went back.

Roman: Why did they leave?

Soto: Well, the youngest one is a teacher, so I think he thought it was better to teach school down there and he's got his family there too--his wife and... My older brother, he's got his own house. He works in a farm there so that's why they went back for that reason--to take care of the farm.

Roman: Do you think you want to go back?

Soto: I would never go back. I don't have a reason to go back. I have a good job here, I've got my family here.

Roman: Okay. So, what was the first job you got?

Soto: My first job was working in a factory. They used to make dresses, nightgowns, shirts, and everything. They first started paying me \$0.95 an hour.

Roman: Was that good money at that time?

Soto: considering the cost of living, it was good. I still was making like \$35 a week. That was enough to save my money and send my family some money, pay rent for my room, which we used to share together--me and my friend. At that time I was paying like \$7 a week (for rent) for a furnished room.

Roman: Did you have any benefits?

Soto: No benefits.

Roman: So how did you get to where you are today? A detective.

Soto: That's a long story. What happened was in 1959 I started my first job. It was in 1964 I left that job for the super-market chain. I worked there for a period of four years until 1968. It was in 1968 when a spanish station announced that Newark was hiring minorities. They were hiring bi-lingual police officers, but they had to go to school first.

They had to be high school graduates. It was a good job. So I called this radio station and they gave me more information about how to become a police officer. They told me I had to be a high school graduate or have a high school equivalent. I had neither one. But I said, "I could pass this test, I know I can pass this test." I knew English, the English in Puerto Rico was much better than the one they were teaching here. So, the only thing that was stopping me was that I didn't have a high school equivalency. You have to have a high school equivalency first in order to take a police test. So, I applied for a high school equivalency. I went to school. When it was ready for me to take the high school equivalency, I went. I knew that I had passed. I just knew it. I had the mark. So, at that time, without even having this diploma with me, I went ahead and took the police test and I failed the first time. I failed for like 15 questions. That wasn't too bad considering my language barriers and everything. So I said, I need to brush up on some vocabulary words and spelling and all of that, so I bought books, and I said, "next time I take that test, I'm gonna pass". Now everything else was easy. So, in December, 1968, I took the test again and in '69, in May, I was appointed police officer. I came out number ten on their list. That was kind of high; that was very good; one of the best. Number 10 out of 200. I passed the test May 6, 1969. That was when I went to the Police Academy. I spend six weeks there, training in law, criminal procedure, everything about being a police officer, and when I graduated in October, '69, I had to work the beat. Midnight, from 8:00 - 12:00, 12:00 - 8:00, 8:00 - 4:00; around the clock. At that time, the pay wasn't that good, but it was much better than the one I had. It was like \$5,000 more than the regular job I had had at the supermarket. At that time there was like, maybe, two Puerto Rican police officers on the job. One of the police officers, he was promoted to detective and I took his place in that precinct. I was working for him because he had become a detective so I was working in the radio car at the time and the other police officers somewhere in the other precincts, I don't know which one. And I was the third one [Puerto Rican police officer]. I worked there until 1971 when I got promoted to detective. One reason I got promoted was, I believe, the need for Spanish police officers. And many good arrests that I made when I was on the beat. Also I could speak both languages which was one thing that helped me become a detective. They appointed me to work with the Hispanic community, along with the police department at the same time. I worked there until 1975. In 1975, I asked to be transferred to the anti-crime unit which deals with street crimes--all these high crimes that are actually happening on the streets; that you could just ride around looking for that crime. You could actually see

what was happening and that's the job I asked for. I worked there until 1980, another five years that I put in there. In 1980, I went back to Narcotics Squad. In the Narcotic Squad, I got many commendations, many citations. I went to the State Police Academy to learn about all the drugs that exist in Newark and every other city. I worked there until I got transferred to the Warrant Squad. The Warrant Squad deals with all contemps of court. Those people who don't show up for arraignment, those people who don't go to court for trial. Subsequently, we're going to get a warrant for their arrest and that's what I'm doing now, until, I guess, I retire. That will be another six years before I retire.

Roman: How do you think your family feels about you working as a cop?

Soto: At the beginning, it wasn't easy. Especially for my wife. She didn't want me to become a police officer. I believe she had a reason for that. Like any other wife, she thinks it's dangerous--I think it's dangerous--but, what can I say. It's a job like any other job. It's a good-paying job, and good benefits. If I would've listened to her, I would have still been working in the supermarket. No benefits, or anything else.

Roman: So, how many children do you have?

Soto: Four. They're all girls. I have two that are married, with two grandchildren, and I have two young girls. One is fifteen and the other is thirteen. They're both in school.

Roman: So, going back to your wife--how did you meet Minerva?

Soto: I met her at the first job that I worked back in 1959. We used to work together.

Roman: Had she come from Puerto Rico?

Soto: Yes, she did.

Roman: And you never knew each other from Puerto Rico?

Soto: We had never met before that time.

Roman: So, what kind of work did she have? She did the same thing?

Soto: More or less. She used to work on the floor. I used to work on the machines.

Roman: How long did you know each other before you got married?

Soto: A couple of years.

Roman: After you got married, you moved out. So, where did you go to live?

Soto: We had a small furnished apartment for the first couple of years.

Roman: How were you as a child? Were you a happy child? Were you quiet?

Soto: I was very quiet. Very shy.

Roman: As you grew up, how did you act in school? How did you like school?

Soto: I hated it. Especially math. That was the only class I hated the most, and that was the only reason that I quit school because of math. And up to now I never regretted that I left school because of the math. Right now I don't use it that much. It didn't help me to pass the test either. There was not too much math in the police test.

Roman: As a child, what did you aspire to be? What were your goals?

Soto: I always wanted to become a police officer. That was my first goal. I always liked the police. Always liked the law. Especially because my godfather was a police officer in Puerto Rico, so I wanted to be just like him.

Roman: What did your parents think about that?

Soto: They didn't say anything. When they heard that I was a police officer, they just felt bad because, just like my wife, they said that it was very dangerous. They would say, "take care of yourself, and don't do anything foolish".

Roman: When you came from Puerto Rico to New Jersey, what was your first reaction when you saw New Jersey as compared to P.R?

Soto: I thought it was very pretty. Especially Newark at that time was very pretty; a lot of opportunities. I believe that Newark is one of the greatest, if not the greatest, city in New Jersey. For everything. You can become anything you want in Newark. You've got everything in Newark and that's the reason why I said I would never go back. If you got everything in New Jersey--in Newark you got everything you want--I don't see any reason to go back to Puerto Rico. I don't mean...I go back as a vacation. I like to see my family...but not to stay.

Roman: How long did it take you to get used to living here?

Soto: I got used to it the first week I was here.

Roman: So, it was no major change. How about the winter?

Soto: That's the only reason that, everytime the winter came I felt like going back to P.R. But I got used to it. I still hate the winter, especially the snow.

Roman: Do you ever plan to move somewhere else? Even if you say you don't want to go back to Puerto Rico, would you plan to move to some other place where it's tropical?

Soto: Right now, I'm thinking about moving down to Florida. If I decide to reitre, it's a nice place to live and get a house, that's a state where I'll probably go--to Florida.

Roman: How would you compare the life you live now in New Jersey to that of your relatives living now in Puerto rico?

Soto: I think that it's better here, much better. Even though my brother has a good job there, it's a different way of living here than it is in Puerto Rico. The weather is better down there. There's more money here, there's more freedom here. I would say more freedom.

Roman: Have you ever voted for any Puerto Rican candidate?

Soto: I have. Many times. I voted for councilman, also for Senator. I don't vote for a Puerto Rican candidate just because they're Puerto Rican. If I think he's a good candidate to become a councilman or to become any other position, I'll vote for him. If I think he's not good for that position, I won't vote for him. I don't vote for him because of his race, I vote for him because his qualification for the job.

Roman: Don't you feel proud when you have someone of your own nationality going up there? Moving up?

Soto: I'm very proud, and that's why I always support--like I said, if it's a good candidate--I will support him. And I hope that the first politician that we have here, or the first elected candidate will be councilman and it's going to be very soon that we're going to have a Puerto Rican councilman in Newark. So, I'm looking forward to supporting one of them. Whoever runs for it, if I think it's good, I will support him and hopefully after that--who knows? Maybe the next mayor will be Puerto Rican.

Roman: Do you belong to any social organizations?

Soto: No, I don't.

Roman: To any clubs?

Soto: No, I don't.

Roman: What kind of hobbies do you get involved in?

Soto: The only hobby that I get involved in, and the only one I like the most, is play baseball, softball. Right now I belong to a club.

Roman: Is it Spanish-oriented?

Soto: Yes, it's mixed. They call it the Puerto Rican Old-Timer's League which is not exactly "old-timers", but it's after 40. those players that used to play when they were young and then they retire. Now they're stuck, they make their own league. They call it the Puerto Rican Old-Timer's League. They play Saturdays and I belong to my other squad and I plan to play again this year.

Roman: Are the hours that you work..does that impose on anything else you want to do?

Soto: No. It doesn't bother. I work weekdays. I work Monday to Friday and I have Saturday and Sunday off and that's what I do. If I have to play ball, I do it on Saturdays and Sundays. It doesn't interfere with my job.

Roman: With your family, how do you celebrate holidays-- days like Christmas and New Years?

Soto: Just like every other family celebrates. Different years they probably get together at a house. At Christmas, we all get together. Most of the time we get together with my wife's relatives every Christmas.

Roman: Have you ever gone back to Puerto Rico to spend Christmas over there?

Soto: I've been there once or twice--about 28 years ago, for Christmas. The reason is not that I don't want to go there during Christmas, it's just that I don't have a vacation during that time. Newark Police vacations start December 15th, so that's the only reason.

- Roman: With your job as a detective back in 1974, I think it was when we had those riots in Branch Brook Park. By that time, you were already in the department, weren't you? How did that affect you?
- Soto: It didn't affect me. It helped cause I communicated with the Hispanic community. I worked many hours during that time. Worked days and nights. Tried to communicate with them and tried to find out what was going wrong, what could be done so we could stop it the next. And it seems, at the time I was assigned to the [communications] bureau, so a lot of people knew me and a lot of people did respond to the questions that I asked them. They trusted me. It was very helpful that I was assigned to the bureau [communications].
- Roman: Being that the Puerto Rican population in Newark is large, do you think Puerto Ricans feel better about having Puerto Rican cops? They feel more comfortable?
- Soto: They do. They feel more comfortable to talk to people of their own kind--Spanish. Especially those who can't communicate in English. Once they see a Puerto Rican police-officer, right away they want to talk to him, rather than a white guy or a black guy. It feels better to talk to the Puerto Rican cop.
- Roman: Do you think that the other cops, the black or the white, would discriminate against them? Have you ever seen that?
- Soto: It's like everybody else. I never worked with a guy that discriminates against anybody because all my partners, we would get along together and they'd even tell me, "go ahead, talk to them. You understand them." So, it was no big deal.
- Roman: If you could start all over, would you have come to NJ, or would you have gone somewhere else? Would you have stayed in PR?
- Soto: I would've come back here again. If I were to back to my childhood, and had decided to come back, I'd come back to Newark again.
- Roman: To Newark specifically?
- Soto: To Newark specifically. Newark gave me what I am now. I was born in PR and I'm glad I'm Puerto Rican, but whatever I have, I'm grateful to Newark.

Roman: In general, how has life treated you? Do you think you've reached all the goals that you set as a child?

Soto: Not yet. There's always room for something. You never stop learning. You learn new things every day and I think I haven't finished yet. Who knows where I'm gonna be from now. I have six more years to go in the police department, and after that I know I will retire, but I don't know what I'll be after that. But the main thing I wanted to be was a police officer and a good detective, and a good husband, and that's where I am now.

Roman: How do you see your children's futures?

Soto: I think they'll be very good. I think they're going to follow my tradition. They're girls. One of them wants to become a police officer.

Roman: Which one?

Soto: The one that's 15 years old. I'd say, think about it first because it's tough to become a police officer, especially if you've got to work on the street. It's tough for a man, never mind a woman, to become a police officer. Not unless you're going to have a desk job as soon as you get out of the academy. You're going to go to an office. What good is it for a police officer? I would call that a clerk. You've got to deal with all kinds of people, and it's tough.

Roman: Do you think your children would ever like to move to PR?

Soto: I don't think so. They were born here and they like it here. They would have to start all over again in PR. I don't know. I don't think so.

Roman: Did your parents ever want to come to NJ?

Soto: My mother, she always wanted to come to NJ. She did. She came a couple of times. But since she left my father in Puerto Rico, she didn't stay long here. She had to go back. Just for vacation.

Roman: How come your father didn't come?

Soto: He came once. He came here. He was sick when he first came. Just for a couple of days and had an operation on, _____ and he died here and he wanted to go to PR. So we took him to Puerto Rico for his burial. That's the only time he came here, just to get an operation, and the operation didn't go through. He died. What a way to die. He came here for two days, then he had to go back. It was very sad.

Roman: So your mother left right after that?

Soto: My mother died before. My mother died in May, 1982, and three months after that, my father died in August. I think because my mother died, it was one of the reasons my father didn't want to go through. My father wanted to leave. My father said one time, "What good is the body without the head", so three months later, he died. God knows, I think they're together again in heaven.

Roman: What other memories do you have of your parents?

Soto: Good memories. They were very good, very good to me. I loved them very much.

Roman: How would you compare the way you've raised your children to the way people used to raise their children?

Soto: You mean the way they raised me back in those days and the way I raise my kids now?

Roman: Uh-huh.

Soto: Very different. Right now there's not too much respect-- I'm not talking about my kids, I'm talking about other kids. 'Cause I've seen them on the street. Sometimes the father says something to the kid and the kid answers back, either curses him out, or say, "the hell with you", or "stop it", or "I'll do it", or something like that. In fact, in those days in Puerto Rico if my father says something to me, I just have to keep quiet, bow my head down. That's it. You don't ask no questions. You just do it, whatever your father says it. "You go there", you had to go there. Terrible punishment if you don't do it. You do something bad to somebody, either a brother, sister, or your neighbor, your father's gonna punish you. I remember on one occasion, one of my friends, or one of the kids that used to go to school with me, was talking about the punishment his father used to give him, and he said he took his clothes off and hanged him by his feet and put a light like fire on his body, hit him with rope, hit him with branches, threw him out the window, put him inside the closet. Sometimes you even see movies like that. I don't know how you call that, but the roses....

Roman: Thorns?

Soto: Right. That's what they're called. The father threw him out of the window and he would up on top of those roses and the next day the teacher asked him what happened and the kid just said that he fell. He never told the teacher about what his father did. He was afraid of his father.

Roman: In those times, there weren't center for child abuse?

Soto: They didn't even know about that. They didn't know what child abuse means and even if they knew, there's nothing they could do. What would they say? "It's my kid, I'll take care of him. You take care of yours."

Roman: Do you think that nowadays they have that child abuse? Do you think that's good or bad?

Soto: Child abuse is bad. It's always been bad and it is bad. I can't see child abuse and if I see somebody abusing a child, they're gonna have it with me. Cause I know there's a lot of places that you can go to there're a lot of places in NJ, places in Newark, places in New York where you can call the operator and get help and it's open 24 hours a day.

Roman: But, do you think some of the kids would use that as a backup? They won't respect because of the fact that they have that to fall on?

Soto: They might. I don't know. I never got abused by my father, although in those days, there was a lot of abuse and everything. I never got abused like that. I always respected them and I guess that's one of the reasons that I became a policeman. I'm a law-abiding citizen and I guess that's where I am now.

Roman: How do you see the population in New Jersey in the future? Do you think it would get better in the years to come, or will it get worse.?

Soto: It's gonna get better. It's good right now, but it's gonna get better as time goes by...it's gonna get better.

Roman: With crime rate going up....

Soto:well it goes up and down. There's no way to tell what's going to happen next year. Right now, I don't know what's the crime rate. It's high, but it could'nt be higher than last year, that's for sure.

Roman: Of all the assignments as an officer, which one did you like the most? Which one did you dislike?

Soto: The one I didn't like most was the one that had to do with narcotics division, which I never asked for. They just gave me that detail. There's a lot of drugs in this city and, since I was living in the city, they thought that it would be a good asset to the department to have me in the narcotics squad. Although I didn't like it, I had to take it.

there was no question. I didn't like it because of the reason that I live in Newark and I had to deal with people that did narcotics and wanted to sell drugs in Newark and since most of them knew me when I was a cop, they even knew my address, so I didn't do an effective job as a narcotics officer. Most of the time, I was arresting for narcotics sales and I got trailed a lot of times. They knew where I lived, and a lot of times, they even tried to burn my house. And that was the reason why I asked out and then, subsequently, I made a transfer. That's the one that I hated the most. The one that I like the most is the one that I'm doing now. Right now I could still arrest people. I could even help people. People that know I have a warrant for their arrest and people call the office and they find out what can they do about their warrant, and I tell them what to do. If it has to do with traffic warrants, I'll tell them what to do with traffic warrants. It's easy to take care of the traffic warrants. Once you have a bunch of warrants, you can come down and they can make an arrangement with a court to the judge and make payments. Pay every two weeks and there's no reason from that to get arrested. There's no reason for that. Once they come to the office. That's one reason why I like it, cause I help them avoid getting arrested on the street. But the same with the bench warrant. With the bench warrant, they put a bail on it. The bail is like a fine. Everytime you have a warrant, most of the time it has a bail and when they call I tell them how much is the bail. How much and they have to come to the office with the bail. If it's \$200, they must come with the \$200, so that they don't have to spend time in jail. They place the \$200 as a bail, they walk out, they go home, then they come back at a later date to see the judge. The judge will fine them. Alright, going back to the bail, the benefit that you have when you come to the office with the bail is that you place that bail, you get a receipt, and you go back home. On a later date, you're gonna get a letter from the court that you must come to court and you face the judge. The judge will either find you guilty or not guilty. If they find you guilty, you must pay a fine, and that bail you had already deposited, you can use to pay the fine. That's simple. That's a benefit you get when you come to the office already prepared with the money. If you get stopped on the street by a radio car and you don't have that bail money with you, you go to jail until you've paid that bail. That's the only benefit.

Roman: So you're now working in the warrant squad, right?

Soto: I'm on the warrant squad.

Roman: If you were to be on the street and you saw a crime, you can still arrest people, right?

Soto: I can still arrest people for any crime, any warrant, and anything I see that goes on in the street. I'm a police officer and once you become a police officer you must enforce the law 24 hours.

Roman: Well, I guess that's all for now. I want to thank you for giving me the interview and I wish you a lot of luck.

Soto: Well, thank you and I hope there will be a better interview next time. I wasn't prepared for it. Like I said, everything I said is the truth and it comes from the heart.

Roman: Thank you.

END OF TAPE